Ailé (Winged)

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/26919784.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter
Additional Tags:	Surrealism, Body Horror - perhaps?, depending on how you see it, I'd say Will had a sexy dream with the swan, Ambiguous/Open Ending, canon divergence - season 1, No Beta, if you squint a little bit, you'd see that this is actually another piece of crack, Basically Hannibal turned into a literal bird
Language:	English
Series:	Part 6 of October Writing Experiments 2020 👁👄👁
Stats:	Published: 2020-10-09 Words: 2,991 Chapters: 1/1

Ailé (Winged)

by celestialcello

Summary

‘I was… by a lake, and there was no telling if it’s morning or night, only that the sky was a cobalt blue. For a while, I was alone. Behind me there was a boundless forest. I didn’t turn around to look, didn’t have to - I knew it was, stretching far and wide.’

‘And then?’

‘In the middle of the lake, a black swan was afloat. It was looking at me. We saw each other in a way that’s… We saw each other with absolute clarity.’

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Prompt list from tarmasz on instagram (https://www.instagram.com/tarmasz/?hl=en)!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

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He woke up to an itching, ineffable feeling on his back, like a thousand needles erupting out from beneath his skin, between the shoulder blades, in his veins. Hannibal's initial suspicion was some unusual skin disease, and indeed the small, hardened lumps as he reached back to feel them seemed to confirm this pre-diagnoses. Not a good sign. But Hannibal was never quick to panic. Instead he calmly pushed himself up from the bed in the haze of early morning, and made his way into the bathroom.

Once there, he removed the top of his pyjama and inspected his back to see several trails of redness. He must have scratched himself in sleep out of the discomfort. Otherwise, there was no signs of concern. The flaring of these nerves was perhaps merely the last reminder of some unpleasant dream that he has forgotten, lost in the unconscious among myriads of buried sounds and words.

As second passed, he sighed into concession when his eyes failed to even locate a single visible blemish and got into the shower to begin his day. A little bit earlier than usual, but that could never do any harm. He had meat to carve from the steak maturing in his basement, a particular Ms. Lass who would need her daily dosage of glucose solution and a few other drugs he has been trialling on her. They have achieved quite astounding progress with phototherapy, and he was particularly satisfied with her response to the recording of Fredrick Chilton he had obtained through YouTube, where the man's vanity had landed him a few interviews on some profit-driven, pseudoscientific channels. He considered this a much more befitting use of these garbles. Congratulating himself silently, Hannibal stepped out of the rainforest shower, feeling refreshed despite the lingering annoyance on his back, which had somehow extended to his upper arm. Yet there was no physical manifestation of the nameless ailment, to his chagrin. Apparently an appointment with a dermatologist at John Hopkins would be unavoidable after the years he had eschewed the place except for his annual check-up. Thinking back on his most recent meal: venison stew cooked with sloe gin and polenta, he could not unearth any plausible clue.

Something is growing from the skin. An improbable, yet most intuitive answer hopped into his mind as he set up the syphon coffee maker, paying attention to the minute sound of still water being stirred into motion by the wavering flame. He reached for his back inside the robe again, and felt his fingertips coming across patches of rising tips nicking at the nerves. Hannibal frowned, and finally sent the dreadful message to one of his many friends still working at the hospital, quickly described the symptom and explained his need of an appointment ASAP.

Reply came quickly, thanks to the splendid dinner party he had thrown just short of two weeks ago, telling him that he could come in around 8:30 if he'd like to get this done before starting the day. Pleasantries were exchanged on the glowing screen and the promise of an afternoon tea was granted as he sipped on his coffee, an artisan roast from Nyeri in Kenya. Taste of rhubarb and just a hint of the sourness akin to wine.

Hopefully by evening this inconvenience would be resolved, his appointment with Will Graham always warranted his full attention. A mind diseased by the burden of its knowledge

paired nicely with the sweet scent of encephalitis. The denial and confession constantly in struggle, the fevered confusion that made the roiling lights in those eyes stall for the briefest of moments as if capturing them onto an invisible canvas for an eternity; the occasional lucidity and inquisitive look. He knew everything, from the very day he dedicated his first piece to him. The anticipation of a grandeur revelation promised already in the restless melody of indefinite hope.

He finished the coffee, and skipped the food in preparation for the blood test. In just under fifteen minutes he had finished concealing himself under his shirt, vest, and jacket, completed with a tie suitable to his discretion and a pair of polished brogues adorned with intricate patterns around the rim. Making sure he that he had all the files necessary in the messenger bag, Hannibal locked the heavy wooden door behind him with a quiet click, and breathed out his annoyance into the brisk autumn air at the intensified feeling of his skin giving away to the unnamed, stretching needles around his bones.

~*~

‘Dr. Lecter! Judith has told me everything she said I would need to know, to save your time this morning. I believe you said there is no visible blemishes?’ Dr. Clifford greeted Hannibal at the reception in an overly enthusiastic manner which was starting to give him a headache he definitely did not need.

‘That is correct, Dr. Clifford.’ He managed a smile, which seemed to have encouraged Dr. Clifford as the man began to lead them through the winded, bustling hallway of John Hopkins to his office on the dermatology floor.

‘No worries at all, we have seen most, if not all varieties of known skin-related diseases here. And judging from the record of your annual check-up which I just received a moment earlier, I can promise you everything would be fine.’

‘Very reassuring, thank you for seeing me this morning, Dr. Clifford.’

‘Please, Richard. Sorry if I have been bombarding you for the last few minutes. You are practically a legend here, Dr. Lecter. It is an honour to meet you,’ Dr. Clifford was practically beaming at Hannibal with an eager look. And apart from Hannibal’s humble smile, poor Dr. Clifford would have no idea that he had just earned himself a place in the rolodex. His tongue would be served with a red-wine sauce and a side of turnip and bacon.

But for now they exchanged small talks until they arrived at the office. Hannibal hanged up his suit jacket alongside his vest, dexterously unbuttoned his shirt while Richard sanitised his hand, put on his latex gloves and donned the mask.

‘If I may.’ Richard enquired before he began a closer examine at Hannibal’s back, to which he nodded, although he could barely repress the urge to snap the man’s neck as his finger begin to through the addled region to look for any lumps underneath. It soon ended with a confused frown on the dermatologist’s face when he finished taking swab samples.

‘You can put your clothes back on now, Dr. Lecter. Just as you have described, there seemed to be no immediate sign of concern. May I ask if you have recently changed any of the

chemicals you use, detergent, shower gel or soap, shampoo? It could be a mild allergic reaction that would be gone in a few hours.'

Hannibal bit back his rising annoyance. Contrary to the perfectly reasonable speculation of the soon-to-be-dead Dr. Clifford, the eerie tingling beneath his skin had deepened. He could practically sense something elongating gradually inch by inch at the seam of his every pore, the whole of his back and the arm.

'Unfortunately, no. However, I should have hoped this to be nothing but a minor allergy.' When he turned around to face Richard back in his three-piece, Hannibal replied firmly with the best facade of cordiality he could muster at the present moment. *Bresaola*, he decided, for the legs.

'Either way. I have already collected some samples, as you may have felt just now. We will also need to sample some of your blood as well and get these to the lab today. Please tell me you haven't had breakfast yet.'

'No.' He replied curtly.

'In that case would you be interested in a quick cup of coffee and croissant in the cafeteria? If you are not in a hurry, that is?' Dr. Clifford finished scribbling a few lines of notes in the form as he spoke.

Hannibal considered the proposition, and a plan soon take shape in the back of his mind. 'Unfortunately my first appointment today starts at 9:30. But if I could have your business card, I'd like to have you around for dinner some time.'

'I'm taking you up on that offer, Dr. Lecter. There you go.' With guileless glee, he retrieved the little square piece of paper and handed it over to Hannibal. The latter nodded as his eyes flitted through 'Dr. Richard Clifford, M.D., Dermatology Dept., John Hopkins Hospital' before placing it in his chest pocket.

'Very well.'

Once he got rid of Dr. Clifford at the entrance to the parking lot, the irksome sensation beneath hidden beneath the layers of fabrics returned its assault to his mind, this time both fiercer and milder. He closed his eyes, trying to repress the urge to tear out his own skin as he made his way to the Bentley.

Growing, growing, growing. Are you too going mad? He barely noticed the journey from the hospital to his office, neither the orderliness of Haydn nor the eerie caprice of Prokofiev helped exterminate the weeds of whispers in his head. Once there, he rushed into the washroom down the empty hallway and unceremoniously stripped himself again in rage both cold and seething.

And this time he finally saw the bane of his suffering since morning. In a morbid trance, he observed the specks of dried crimson and the black tips of feathers piercing through the thin barrier all across his back, extending onto his shoulder like smoke of plague.

A mirthless laugh escaped his throat.

'One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed into a horrible vermin.'

~*~

The rest of the day crept by at a gruesomely slow pace, seconds dragged into minutes then hours, and he could practically feel the calabus extending into rachis as his patients narrated their pallid and lifeless internal turmoils in vaguely melodramatic manners. The inevitable banality in their narration did little to quench the agitation that was fluttering throughout every part of him, threatening to upend the last resemblance of structure in his mind, all of its riddle-like hallways and painted ceilings. Hannibal hypothesised that like fledgelings the semiplume would erupt first, and with great humility sat through the rest of his appointments until the daylight dimmed into a hazy orange, which was soon followed by night.

Before he opened the door at 7:30pm to welcome Will Graham, Hannibal rolled up his sleeve to check the watch. And the promise of remiges had surfaced on his forearm. He recalled all the folklores of hapless men and women being turned into a bird by a curse or were freed from their body after great suffering, and wondered with sarcastic joy what brand of monster he was finally becoming.

Or perhaps his soul had finally grown tired of the last shred of sanity.

All the more reason to have one more conversation with Will Graham, when they still could. *Folie à deux.* The plan has always been, after all, to force himself into Will's mind until the same shadow consumed them both; to forge connection with the snarling, decidedly unkind soul in chain and cage, and by extension both gaining the final liberty one could obtain in this life by being understood, and losing the absolute freedom in the recluse of isolation. Hannibal frowned when part of him wished the metamorphosis would not claim him so soon.

He opened the door to the waiting room. The familiar scent of Will's aftershave had a surprisingly soothing effect which was reflected at a psychosomatic level. At least his skin had stopped burning and tearing, although he still took a deep breath to adjust to the unusual feeling of the hardened tips scratching against the shirt.

For some reason Will did not greet him, not even a 'good evening'. He turned around to meet Hannibal with a pale and expressionless look, which has slowly become a usual occurrence for the man. Hannibal searched his face and failed to discern anything. Perhaps he was disassociating again after being inside the mind of another killer?

'Hello Will, please come in.' Hannibal lowered his voice as to not startle Will (*he did care about him, though in a different way from the conventional, saccharine notion of the word*).

Will blinked. Once, twice, and he resurfaced from whatever depth he had just wandered into.

‘Hi, Dr. Lecter. I’m… sorry. There was something on my mind, to say the least.’

‘And I am glad you could make it to our session. Conversation is a powerful medium effective in relieving us of the burden of our own thought. Have a seat.’ He traced Will’s movement fondly as the man casually left his briefcase by the armchair, apparently having decided that he would not wander away tonight. Hannibal carefully filed away the image of Will in his plain blue shirt and khaki pants to the room in the corner of his mind he had reserved for Will. Just one more little privilege he had allowed himself to indulge in, such that there would never be a time they would be irreparably severed.

He felt Will’s silently inquisitive look lingering on him, and he returned it with practiced patience until Will deflected his eyes downwards momentarily.

‘I had a dream last night.’ He started. A slightly odd topic which they had only breached once or twice since their therapy session started. It piqued Hannibal’s curiosity immediately.

‘Tell me.’

‘I was… by a lake, and there was no telling if it’s morning or night, only that the sky was a cobalt blue. For a while, I was alone. Behind me there was a boundless forest. I didn’t turn around to look, didn’t have to - I knew it was, stretching far and wide.’

‘And then?’

‘In the middle of the lake, a black swan was afloat. It was looking at me. We saw each other in a way that’s… We saw each other with absolute clarity.’

It was then Hannibal saw the end of his latest evolution (devolution?). He barely repressed a groan inside his throat as finally, after the endless hours, *they* have obliterated the disguise of his skin. He closed his eyes, and smiled, genuinely, for the first time in a long while.

The beauty of fate, as history had shown, was that man had to ask for his own punishment before embracing it with all its force and cruelty.

He pressed on. ‘Do you care to elaborate a little bit, Will?’

And with that said, those brilliant blue eyes, clear yet perilous like the sea before storm fixated on Hannibal in a way they had never been, piercing like the blade of a sapphire raspier.

‘I know I have to kill it, and it knows, too.’

‘Did you? In that dream?’ His bones were turning hollow. Hardened scales climbed up along his leg, devouring the superfluous fat and muscle, his blood rushed into the capillaries lining rachis of the soon-to-be coverts on his wings.

‘Yes. I walked on the lake. Its surface unperturbed by my movement, absorbing all the sound like leaf-covered forest floor in late autumn. I got closer and closer and the swan remained there. Its eyes… They were sinister, strikingly beautiful, breathtaking.’

‘I plunged its head underneath the water until it disappeared.’

Hannibal’s heart was beating like a crazed beast in the confine of his ribcage, a glimpse of his hand showed that the humane paleness was eroding away into a lustrous sable. Such be the moment of truth, perhaps.

‘How did you feel when the swan drowned to its death?’

‘I don’t… I don’t know. I just remember that when I looked down at my own reflection, it wasn’t me. I saw a stag adorned with feather, hooves aligned with my feet, its antlers on my head. I tried to retreat from it, from the lake. But the water came back to life and took me underneath. I woke up feeling… Calmed, Dr. Lecter. Like I haven’t been in years.’

Something seized his larynx and was modifying the structure of the tissue and cartilage, and dread took over Hannibal when for once, he could not find the word as he began to lose his voice.

However, Will did not wait for his response and instead picked up his bag in search of something.

‘And when I did wake up, I found this beside my pillow.’ Finally got what he wanted, Will’s attention returned to his psychiatrist, much to the man’s bitter delight.
His lips tightened when he saw what it was - not in anger, but in a bout of hysteria and the thoroughly unpleasant, vexing, violent wave of regret. The divine punishment matching the sins of the sinner.

Lying lifeless on Will’s palm was a single ink-black plume, syphoning away all the light and colour around it.

‘I’m glad you could see it too. At least I haven’t gone completely mad. Tell me, where do you think it could come from, Hannibal? It does not belong to a raven or crow.’
Soundlessly Hannibal extended his arm towards Will, who looked at him undauntedly, waiting for the answer he already knew when he came here. There was no point in hiding now - he could feel the sheath of bristle along his neck like a blanket of moss. He tossed away the cuff links in an uncouth manner, and freed the lengthening wings from its prison underneath the layers of silk and mesmerising paisley pattern.

‘What was the hint you have found in that lake?’ His voice sounded weird and the sentence came out like a distorted warbling of a real swan.

‘Time, in an unclosed circle, with numbers tumbling down into the sobering water.’

Opposite Will, among the pile of shedded layers like unwanted skins, the swan did not reply.

He went up to push open the window, and watched it flying into the night.

End Notes

Thanks for reading! I spent a bit longer on this one than the other prompt writing, but mostly the story has written itself... :D Bon weekend y'all❤️

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